

# BREAKING BRITAIN

For all that basketball has many passionate fans in the UK, it has never been a mainstream sport. Joanna Sutherland, the competition manager for basketball at London 2012, is determined that the Olympic Games will change that.

By Adam Fraser. Photographs by Graham Fudger

➤ Joanna Sutherland is not underestimating the challenge inherent in hosting the Olympic Games. "It's like 26 world championships in one place," she says with a smile. "I can't just think about my event, because I also have to consider how, say, the transport will affect other events. With accommodation, who can go where? It has to tie in with where other federations will be."

Sutherland, the competition manager for basketball at the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (Locog), has extensive experience in organising international basketball tournaments. A former player herself, she first joined the International Basketball Federation (Fiba) in Munich in 1998, the same year that she was named Scotland's player of the year. A sabbatical working on the 2002 European Athletics Championships aside, she has worked on pure basketball events ever since, including the 2005 men's and women's Eurobaskets, in Serbia and Montenegro and Turkey respectively, and served as operations director of Eurobasket 2007 – Fiba's most successfully marketed event to date. Still, the vast scope of an Olympic Games eclipses almost everything else in sport, and the other competitions on which Sutherland has worked are no exception. "Instead of at a Eurobasket, where there was me and one other guy up to a year before, and we were looking after everything – accreditation, transport, accommodation, the whole thing – we're talking 200 people, going up to something like 3,000 in 2012," she explains. "Even just the sports department was 50 people in January; we'll be 150 people by the end of the year. It's just so much bigger. There's a lot more coordination to it and,

also, I'm not actually in charge of transport, or in charge of accreditation. It's just that much bigger."

Not that the enthusiastic Sutherland is overwhelmed. "When you get on to the court it'll run exactly how a Eurobasket or a World Championship or a World Wheelchair Championship will run, so in that respect it's exactly the same," she says. "The teams have the same requirements around the court: they still need ice; they still need towels; they still need endless amounts of water; that's all the same. It's just that it's

**"To be honest, ticket sales for basketball are the least of my worries. We'll sell out."**

not just you in your little silo on your own – you're connected up to everyone else as well. And with basketball, as this isn't a basketball country, it's getting across what the basketball background is, what the norm is for basketball and wheelchair basketball, what's expected, what we need to do, what we don't need to do."

The need for that extra explanation is a perfect example of why Sutherland's role is two-fold. As well as delivering a top-class basketball tournament for London 2012, her challenge is to ensure the Olympic Games are the next step in raising the profile of basketball in Britain. Contrary to what is often perceived, of course, that mission does not begin from a standing start. ESPN's arrival into the British market in the summer of 2009 has seen the amount of top-quality basketball games available to viewers increase dramatically, with both live

and classic NBA matches screened alongside studio shows such as NBA Fastbreak. NBA franchises, as well, have an increasing presence on British shores: the O2 Arena has welcomed NBA teams for pre-season exhibition matches in each of the last three years. In 2009 a 19,000 sell-out crowd saw the Utah Jazz take on a Chicago Bulls side including Luol Deng, the star of the Great Britain national side, who scored 18 points and provided five assists as his team secured a 102-101 victory. Tickets to this year's game, which will see the Los Angeles Lakers take on the Minnesota Timberwolves in October, sold out in record time in May.

The O2 Arena, to be known as North Greenwich Arena under Olympic sponsorship rules, will host the semi-finals and finals of both the men's and women's basketball tournaments in 2012, and Sutherland is convinced that those games and the earlier stages held in the 12,000-capacity Basketball Arena will, like the O2's NBA pre-season games, sell out. "People ask about ticketing and, to be honest, ticket sales for basketball are the least of my worries. We'll sell out," she predicts confidently. "I hope that it's full of British people. Our ticketing department has already started its sign-up campaign, you can register for interest, and we've had an enormous response. Huge numbers. And it's really promising. People, and these are 95 per cent British people, are saying 'we want to come and see basketball'. For me that's fantastic. The crazy fans that you get from Greece and Lithuania will be there banging drums, and they really understand the sport, but British people want to get in there and see how great basketball can be. The games the NBA puts on raise the profile, and that's what the Olympics can do. It's such a